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IMPROVING THE LITERATURE PROGRAM--POETRY.

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METHODS OF DEVELOPING AN APPRECIATION FOR POETRY IN COLLEGE READERS WHILE INCREASING THEIR READING COMPREHENSION ARE DESCRIBED. A DISCUSSION OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S FEAR OF POETRY IS INCLUDED. THE FOLLOWING TOPICS ARE SUGGESTED FOR POETRY ANALYSIS--TYPES OF STRUCTURE, PATTERNS, THOUGHT OR FEELING, HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE, LANGUAGE EXPRESSION, SYNTAX, AND TYPES OF DEVICES. REFERENCES ARE INCLUDED. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE (SEATTLE, MAY 4-6, 1967). (RH)

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IMPROVING THE LITERATURE PROGRAM: POETRY

Sequence VI, College Level
Friday, May 5, 1967
11:00 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

Teachers of literature, whether it be of English, French, Russian, Spanish, or other origins share with teachers of reading a large, if obvious responsibility, that of instructing their students in the skills and arts of reading. For understanding and enjoyment, which together constitute what one may term genuine appreciation, depend upon the awareness of depth and breadth as well as superficial comprehension of what is read.

In a most suggestive article by Edgar Dale, the necessities for reading any sort of author's expression are detailed clearly and definitely:

> One of the most important outcomes of a general education is learning how to learn. And there is no more important element in reaching this goal than improving reading skills and attitudes.
>
> We too often assume that reading is a mechanical process, a skill subject, something to be completed in the lower elementary grades. We think we've gone far enough in teaching reading when the student can read without undue consciousness of the words--when he has learned the reading skills.
>
> Yet there is a vast difference between the skill of reading, in which we concentrate on what the book says, and the art of reading, which enables us to discover what the article, pamphlet, or book meant to the author and what it now means to us.
>
> First, there is the task of getting the simple sense of what the writer says. This means noting the words and phrases of the passage and relating them to each other. Let's call this reading the lines. It is the simple level of reproducing what was said.

The second job in reading is to discover what the author meant to say. The literal meaning of the passage may lead to a wrong interpretation. The author may have written ironically or sarcastically.

Understanding metaphors may offer difficulties. To accept the metaphor of the Twenty-Third Psalm, one must think of himself as a sheep (without, of course, extending the metaphor to carry the idea of being sheep-like). We may call this second aspect reading between the lines.

There is a third level of reading which is highly individual. We judge or interpret what is read in the light of our own problems, own experiences. We may call this reading beyond the lines. We say to ourselves after reading an article or an editorial: What does this mean to me? How can I make use of it? It is this third phase of the reading process--the application of what is read--that is often neglected. (1)

These levels, identified with admirable clarity by Edgar Dale, apply broadly to all forms and types of reading. But what of the reading of poetry? What special skills, insights, understanding of techniques must be fostered to assist the neophyte in his awareness of what poets throughout the literate ages have contributed to our cultural heritage and our accumulated wisdom?

Young People's Fear of Poetry

At the very outset, most young male and quite a few young female readers are utterly repelled at the mere thought of reading verse, thinking it to be the product of silly, inane, and highly suspect persons. This attitude seems to come as the child leaves the early years, perhaps at the age of 10, or 11 or even 12, and serves to present a complete block to any reasonable understanding. Moreover, this very prejudice will persist largely throughout life, if some capable and thoughtful teacher does not appear to quell it once and forever.

It is not enough merely to reiterate that there is more to poetic expression than may be found in such pieces as "Flower in the Crannied Wall," or "To a Daffodil." Many young readers cringe and fear for their lifelong reputation should they dare to entertain the thought that such a descriptive or lyric passage could possibly have meaning for them. After all, they do have their self-respect to protect.

Hence it seems obligatory to many a teacher of reading or literature to dispel immediately and for all time to come the feeling that the reading -- or writing, for that matter--of poetry is "sissy stuff." For young college readers, I myself resort to a melodramatic half hour of reading aloud. After a brief consideration of the attitude that all poetic expression tends exclusively to consist of silly rhymes or empty or mawkish or

effeminate or insignificant matters, I turn to Amy Lowell's "Patterns" and read it out, slowly enough to permit everyone to recognize the passion, the pathos, the dreadful inevitability of the situation. With a particularly sluggish group, I resort to loud and anguished tones for the last line: "Christ! What are patterns for?" The ensuing silence is finally broken by a disdainful comment, "Sissy stuff!"

Continuing the same approach, I then usually read half a dozen of the most bitter pieces from Spoon River Anthology, such as "Ollie McGee," "Fletcher McGee," "Robert Fulton Tanner," "Cassius Hueffer," "Benjamin Pantier," "Mrs. Benjamin Pantier," and others, concluding with the rollicking and full-blooded "Lucinda Matlock." In the same vein I often read Edwin Arlington Robinson's "Richard Cory." The ironic refrain at the close of each poetic selection, "sissy stuff!" or something synonymous, serves to dispel for almost every listener, whether he wishes to admit it at the moment, the belief that true poetry is without depth and universal appeal.

Having disposed of the skeptics, the rebellious "hoodlums", as John H. Weston calls them, (5), or the fearfully reluctant, the skilled teacher may then safely proceed to the significant matter of the intrinsic value of practice in reading poetry. As Thomas E. Sanders expresses it,

> The demands of our society are such that the "good" reader is rewarded ~~momentarily~~ mountainly, psychologically, and spiritually. And nothing helps the student become a "good" reader as much as poetry. Once he has learned to comprehend through the poetic line, prose becomes much easier for him to read and to write.

> The compression of poetry actually serves comprehension, as a complete work can be examined on one page. The processes of organization, logical thinking, established communication--all can be pointed out in their limited confines. Prose offers no such possibilities. The lengths demanded by the various forms (short stories, essays, novels) create problems in the simple logistics of page numbers if nothing else. Once the student has mastered poetic understanding, however, he can accommodate widely spaced ideas in prose, understanding the transitional elements which poetry makes logical. (3)

When this principle is assmiliated and understood, it is time to begin with particular poems for thorough analysis.

Critical Reading of Verse

At this point, the individual instructor's own preferences or feelings of personal effectiveness may come into play. Perhaps he may choose to dwell upon the significant similarities and differences to be observed in the treatment of specific descriptions, narrations, expositions of ideas, and arguments in poetry as distinguished from prose passages. While readers will find many likenesses between the two, the instructor will need to emphasize the greater concision, intensity, rhythmical and melodious qualities to be revealed in poetic materials. Many reading and literature teachers begin with the simplest and most obvious, that of the language of poetry, and proceed to poetic phrasing, prosody, the kinds of poetic form, that is couplets, tercets, quatrains, etc.

In any event, soon or late, and preferably very early in the training, as I see it, each neophyte reader should be made fully aware that poetic communication is expressed through words and punctuation to develop verse-sentences, and frequently, verse-paragraphs. Simple and plain as this may be to the experienced reader, it comes as a great surprise and means of assistance as well, to those unaccustomed to reading poems.

With the necessary preliminaries accomplished, the instructor may then proceed to utilize the kinds of discussion prompted by the use of such a guide as Lynn Altenbernd and Leslie L. Lewis' Handbook for the Study of Poetry. New York: MacMillan, 1966. This handy little manual begins with language and considers problems of imagery, figurative language, rhetorical devices; goes on to poetic forms, touching upon rhyme and alliteration, and versification and stanzaic or verse patterns. Finally it leads to consideration of poetic content, specifically as to narrative, emotion, historical context, and the like. For a guidebook of not more than eighty-odd pages, this Handbook will prove most helpful to the student and his instructor. One other similar introduction to the reading of poetry may be cited, though there are perhaps a half dozen more that could be mentioned. A much more extensive treatment for the beginning reader of verse is that published by Thomas E. Sanders and titled the Discovery of Poetry. (4) This treatment also begins with language and poetic meaning and develops at some length the matters of syllables, feet, rhyme and pattern of stanza, fixed forms like the couplet and quatrain, and then discusses the sonnet and other standard forms, blank verse, concluding with reading narrative and dramatic poetry. This book provides a great deal more illustrative

material than the Handbook, for a total of almost four hundred pages. Both the Discovery and the shorter guide are most useful, however, and will lead the young or immature reader of verse to some solid thinking about the many qualities and aspects of poetic expression.

A still more comprehensive and analytical approach is to be achieved by the use of the following study-and-discussion guide, which I myself frequently find useful.

In a course which uses a types approach or which provides a collection of poems ordered by types of poetic form, I customarily begin with questions about the literary forms represented. Otherwise, the first questions usually concern poetic language. Thus sections I and V, or others for that matter, may be interchanged as desired or appropriate.

Topics for Poetic Analysis

I Types of structure

A Lyric
1 Sonnet, Italian, English, irregular
2 Ballade
3 Rondeau, roundel
4 Other French forms
5 Ode
6 Elegy
7 Other

B Narrative
1 Ballad, folk or literary
2 Dramatic monologue
3 Epic
a Traditional, literary
4 Saga
5 Other

C Satire
1 Mock heroic
2 Burlesque
3 Other type or form?

II Pattern

A Meter
1 Accented and unaccented syllables
2 Feet: iambic, trochaic, dactyllic, anapestic, etc.

B Line length: monometer, dimeter, trimeter, tetrameter, pentameter, hexameter, heptameter, octameter

C Rhyme scheme -- internal rhyme?

D Blank verse

E Free verse

F Stanza: couplet, tercet, quatrain, quintain, sestet, septet, octave

III Thought or feeling

A Poet's theme, purpose
B Poet's mood
C Passages typical of the poem or the poet
D Age and circumstances of the author, his "background"
E Narrative or thread of story
F Plot - how conveyed, prominent or submerged, essentially dramatic?
G Characters
H Setting, outdoor nature
I Treatments similar in theme
J Originality, literary or natural inspiration, individually particular to poet
K Notable divisions of theme or idea, cumulative effect from stanza to stanza

IV Historical significance--poet shows such style(s), manner(s) as

A Allegory, symbolism
B Impressionistic
C Realistic, universal
D Other

V Language expression

A Words
1 Image-bearing words
2 Action-bearing words
3 Words striking for connotation
4 Words unusual, startling, beautiful in their context
5 Archaisms used, colloquialisms, dialect
6 Kinds of words that bear the burden--adjective, noun, adverb

B Phrases
1 Idiom conservative or racy, appropriate to the matter
2 Originality (vs. threadbare expressions)
3 Noteworthy combinations of word-series, compound words

C Figures
1 Similes
2 Metaphors
3 Other frequently appearing figures such as personification
4 Much or little of the feeling of the poem produced by these figures, inevitable, add right touch of vividness, blend in with tone of piece or produce discord, disharmony

D Syntax
1 Distortion of normal sentence order
2 Symmetrical units of structure used
3 Thoughts flow from line to line, stanza to stanza
4 Balance within verse-sentences

E "Devices"
1 Hyperbole
2 Understatement
3 Question
4 Exclamation
5 Apostrophe
6 Refrain
7 "Aside"
8 Author intrudes himself into view
9 Alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, consonance

Topics like these, while suggestive and helpful, do not by any means exhaust the possibilities. The poet's own life and general outlook, the qualities of the era in which he lived, the literary habits of his "school" or of writers with his outlook or bias--all these and many more will be developed and used profitably by the resourceful instructor. Moreover, these techniques, forms of analysis, or devices for understanding are but the means. The end sought is never to be lost sight of, however interesting or rewarding the study of form or language or any other of these approaches may become. The goal constantly to be kept in focus is understanding; it is full and comprehensive and active appreciation of the poet's meaning, art, and intent. Little more may be accomplished, in truth. And nothing less will suffice.

To bring all this about, the literature or reading teacher is eminently responsible.

For to quote a brief statement from a wise and suggestive essay by Richard Lewis:

> After all is said and done, the teacher--who brings his own enthusiasm for a poem..., who links together the particles of excitement that form the character of the classroom--is the one who determines the influence which poetry will have.... It will be his intuition which will cause him to remain silent..., or to mention again an idea brought up briefly the week before, or to linger on a word and its beauty. It will be his manner of praise or criticism, his taste in choosing material, his way of reading which will bring the final impression to fruition. (2)

References

1. Dale, Edgar. "The Art of Reading," The News Letter, 32 (1966), 1-2.
2. Lewis, Richard. "Bringing Poetry out of Hiding," NEA Journal, 56 (February 1967), 14.
3. Sanders, Thomas E. The Discovery of Poetry, (Glenview, Illinois; Scott Foresman, 1967), VI.
4. Sanders, Thomas E. The Discovery of Poetry, (Glenview, Illinois: Scott Foresman, 1967.)
5. Weston, John H. "Poetry and the Hoodlums," English Journal, 50 (October 1961), 457-77.